

# The Georgia Basin Ecosystem Initiative

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## Introduction

Ecosystem initiatives represent a major component of Environment Canada's contribution toward a more sustainable future for Canada. The department works with a broad spectrum of governments and communities of interest in pursuit of shared objectives. Ecosystem initiatives also advance the achievement of Environment Canada's goals and objectives, including those reflected in the department's overall priorities:

- ensuring Canadians have clean air and water;
- protecting and conserving nature; and
- studying climate change.

Ecosystem initiatives facilitate the achievement of results that can be superior to those achievable through either the department acting alone or through traditional partnerships. They have the capacity to lever government resources, focus science, coordinate efforts, generate public and political support and produce the informed decisions necessary to address ecosystem issues. Moreover, they help to build the capacity of the department and all of the partners and communities involved.

Ecosystem initiatives are cooperative ventures in geographically targeted ecosystems, and are guided by the principles that generally guide departmental programs and activities, including:

- Ecosystem approach—recognizing the interrelationships between land, air, water, wildlife, human activities, etc.;
- Science—basing decisions on sound science, both natural and social, combined with local and traditional knowledge;
- Government partnerships—governments working together to achieve the highest level of environmental quality for all Canadians;
- Citizen/community-based—engaging individuals, communities, aboriginal peoples, industry and governments in the design and implementation; and
- Pollution prevention—it is better for the environment and often more cost effective to prevent pollution from occurring rather than clean up after ecosystems have been degraded.

Ecosystem initiatives also offer opportunities to experiment with innovative forms of governance. They combine the perspectives, interests and resources of citizens and governments with those of the private and non-profit sectors. They promote shared responsibility and accountability for issues while providing a means for federal and provincial governments to deliver on their responsibilities and accountabilities.

## Georgia Basin Ecosystem Initiative

The Georgia Basin ecosystem encompasses an area of approximately 135,000 km<sup>2</sup> and includes the land and inland sea (Georgia Strait, Puget Sound, and the Strait of Juan de Fuca) defined by the heights of land formed by the Vancouver Island Ranges, the Coast Ranges, the Cascades, and the Olympic Mountains. The boundary is marked roughly by Campbell River in the north, Olympia in the south, Hell's Gate in the Fraser Canyon to the east, and Race Rocks in the Strait of Juan de Fuca to the west.

The Basin has one of the most rapidly expanding urban/suburban concentrations in North America.

With its location and high quality of life, it has emerged as a major gateway to the Pacific Rim group of countries.

Two-thirds of British Columbia's population (2.7 million people) and three-quarters of its labor force live in the Georgia Basin. In 1990, the combined Washington/B.C. population in the Basin was 5.7 million. The population within the Georgia Basin is projected to about double in the next 20 years. Development pressures are now imposing unprecedented levels of physical, chemical, and biological stress on the ecosystem. Unchecked, the increasing level of human imposed stress will put at risk the very ecosystem conditions that provide the foundation of the region's economy, the health of individuals, and the overall quality of life that attracted people here in the first place. With appropriately managed growth, a remarkable opportunity exists for this region to provide an example of how to do it right—of providing for the well-being of people and their communities while maintaining (as a minimum) or preferably improving, ecosystem health.

For all of these reasons, the Georgia Basin ecosystem has been assigned a high priority for attention by Environment Canada, and other federal and provincial counterparts. It is here where the greatest concerns are, it is here where the greatest gains are to be made, and it is here where successful resolution of sustainability issues will have the greatest impact on similar problems facing other parts of British Columbia, Canada, and abroad.

The Georgia Basin Ecosystem Initiative (GBEI) has not emerged in a vacuum. Rather, it has been built on decades of activity at the federal, provincial, regional district, and municipal level. For example, the experience/successes of the Fraser River Estuary Study and resulting Fraser River Estuary Management Plan (FREMP), the Fraser River Action Plan (FRAP), the Fraser River Management Plan (FRMP) and its successor the Fraser Basin Council (FBC), the province's Georgia Basin Initiative (GBI), the evolving Growth Management Plans of the Regional Districts, the BC-Washington Environmental Cooperation Council, and a number of more discrete federal and provincial programs have all provided essential input.

## **Initiative Purpose, Vision, and Goals**

The GBEI is an evolving, results- and science-based integrated action plan. Its ***purpose*** is to enhance coordination and collaboration amongst the many government and non-government stakeholders while achieving measurable improvements in:

- conditions affecting environmental health and human well-being;
- the capacity of individuals and families, businesses and organizations, and all orders of government to deal with issues of sustainability; and
- the efficiency and effectiveness of government.

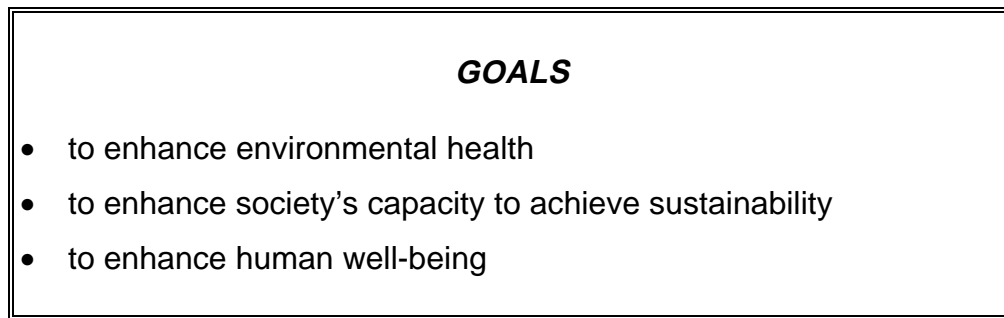
The initiative is taking an approach to dealing with priority issues that is holistic, long-term, consensus-based and inclusive of affected stakeholders. In doing so, it is attempting a new approach to problem solving and the delivery of government services. It is not simply doing more of what has been done already over the years.

A draft ***vision*** statement for the initiative has been developed collaboratively with participants. It is:

### ***VISION***

Managing Growth to Achieve Healthy, Productive, and Sustainable  
Ecosystems and Communities

Similarly, the following three broad **goals** have been identified:



The purpose, vision, and goals all recognize the multi-faceted, environmental, social, economic, cultural and political nature of achieving progress toward sustainability. In addition, the network of collaborators that is being established reaches well beyond traditional “environmental” partners to include many government agencies and businesses and organizations of civil society that capture this breadth of perspective.

The initiative includes three primary streams of activities (Figure 1). In each stream and in each program element, environmental, social, economic, cultural, and political implications play a role in program design, implementation, and assessment of success.

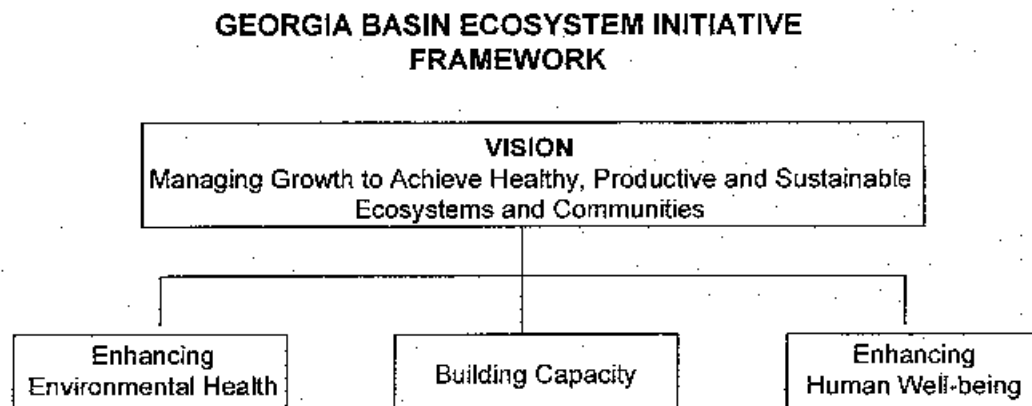


Figure 1. Organization of the Georgia Basin Ecosystem Initiative.

## **Issues**

Key issues facing the Georgia Basin ecosystem that will be addressed by the initiative include:

- the pervasive issue of growth management;
- Lower Mainland air quality (emissions, resulting conditions and implications, solutions);
- continuing point and non-point discharges to surface water and related programs of pollution prevention;
- contamination of ground water, particularly by agricultural activities;
- sewage contamination of shellfish production areas;
- toxic chemicals, in particular endocrine disrupters;

### ***Puget Sound Research '98***

- degradation and loss of coastal and uplands habitat (often from urban and suburban expansion) and the related land management regimes; and
- shifting responsibilities between federal, provincial, and local orders of government, and the need for effective cooperation and collaboration.

To address these issues, multi-agency working groups have been established to develop detailed action plans. Figure 2 summarizes the action plans currently under development.

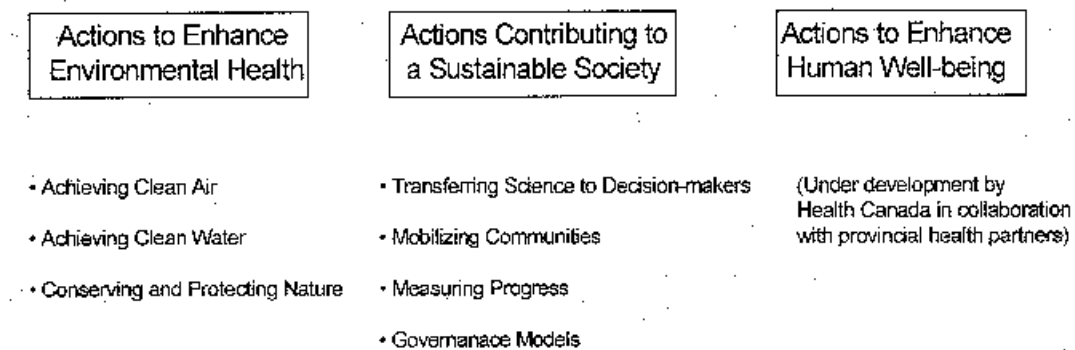


Figure 2. Lower Fraser/Georgia Basin Ecosystem Initiative action plans.

## **Next Steps**

During 1998, the action plans will be completed and implemented with a number of partners. Annual review of progress will be facilitated through an interagency coordination mechanism, and priorities and strategies will be evaluated based on the action plan results and emerging issues in the basin.